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XVII.—*On the Free Indian Tribes of Central America.* By
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[*Read June 11th, 1867.*]

THERE are few persons in Europe, excepting such as have made Central America a special study, who have any definite knowledge of the present condition of its Indian races. Some, I find, have a curiously vague idea that the Spaniards utterly destroyed the native population ; others, that intermarriage, debauchery, and other plagues, which, as we are mysteriously told, invariably afflict a lower grade of human beings when confronted with the higher, have long since exterminated the pure Indian stock ; others again, of superior information, believe that the aboriginal races were all reduced by their invaders, and remain as a docile working class unto this day. The latter impression is certainly true of three-fourths of them, or, at least, was so until ceaseless contests between whites and mestisos taught the coloured peon his overwhelming power, and here or there aroused his ambition and long latent ferocity. Of these “Indios manzos,” or tame Indians, I do not design to speak ; though very numerous in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, they are, as yet, of little account politically, and the outbursts of their fury have not hitherto been followed by any definite assumption of power. Even Rafael Carrera, though for twenty years President and Dictator of Guatemala, governed by the hands of whites or mestisos ; nor did the Indian “peons,” who had raised their kinsman to power, ever attempt to claim authority in the republic.

But in the nominal territory of the five states are many districts of various extent which have now no regard whatever for the white authority. Of some of these the inhabitants seem never to have been brought into contact with the Spanish power, and are to this day ignorant or careless of the white man’s presence ; such are the Menchés in Guatemala, a few tribes of Northern Mosquito, and the Pranzos or Guatusos of Costa Rica. Other races there are, probably more numerous, which resumed their independence after a period of subjection more or less prolonged. Among these may be noted the famous Indians of Darien and of Santa Catarina, visited by Scherzer and Von Tempsky. Beginning at Panama and travelling northward, I will very briefly enumerate the various tribes now absolutely or practically independent.

First in order come the Indians of the isthmus, Darien, San Blas, and Mandinga, upon whom Dr. Cullen read an interesting paper last month to this Society. That gentleman asserts that the invaders never overcame these tribes, and, although this fact seems doubtful to me, it is certain that at this day they regard Spaniards with the bitterest hatred. To English and Americans they are not quite so hostile, but everyone must remember the disastrous explorations of Com. Prevost, R.N., and Lieutenant Strain of the United States Navy, in this territory.

Northward of these, in the tract disputed by New Granada and Costa Rica,—every boundary of Central America is a *casus belli* ever present,—lie the Talamancas, who extend as far as the bay of Matina. These Indians are said to be numerous, and the people of Costa Rica declare them to be allied in race with the Guatusos; but they are not nearly so ferocious. As I was told in San José, it is no unusual event for an adventurous young trader to lead a mule or two into their country, where, if he be not murdered, he will make an enormous profit. The Talamancas live as agriculturists, and are in no way dangerous if not disturbed.

Northward of these again are the far-famed Guatusos or Pranzos, who inhabit a territory lying between the Merivales mountains on the west, the lake of Nicaragua and the San Juan river on the north, the Atlantic shore on the east, and the table land of San José upon the south. Of this tribe I shall speak more at length.

Across the San Juan river, in the republic of Nicaragua, and the reservation of Mosquito, are very numerous tribes, Woolwas, Moscas, Ramas, Poyas, Towkas, Xicaques, and Caribs. The population of these tribes is quite unknown, estimates varying from 8,000 to 25,000. They seem all to be quite savage, although practising many of the virtues belonging to a more civilised existence, such as cleanliness, and industry, and chastity. It is probable that they have neither advanced nor fallen back in their condition since the time of the conquest, but, on the other hand, it must be owned that the Moscas have degenerated vastly in that martial spirit which so frequently routed the valour of the Spaniards.

To the north-west of Nicaragua lies San Salvador, which alone of Central American States has no hostile population of Indians. "There is, nevertheless," says Mr. Squier, "a portion of this state where the aborigines have always maintained an almost complete isolation, and where they still retain their original manners, and, to a great extent, their ancient rites and ceremonies." This district is known as the Costa del Balsimo

or Balsam Coast. It is about fifty miles long by twenty-five broad, lying between La Libertad, the port of San Salvador, and the roadstead of Acajutla, near Sonsonate. This district is entirely occupied by Indians, retaining habits but little changed from what they were at the time of the conquest. It is only traversed by footpaths, so intricate and difficult as to baffle the efforts of the stranger to penetrate its recesses. The difficulty of intercourse is enhanced, if not by the actual hostility of the natives, by their dislike to any intrusion on the part of the whites, be they Spaniards or foreigners." These people are called Nahuals, and are thought, with some probability, to be Aztec in origin, and allied to the Niquirans of Nicaragua.

Northward of San Salvador, and stretching from sea to sea, lies Guatemala, the most powerful of the five republics. Its nominal territory is vastly curtailed by Indian tribes partly or wholly ignoring the central authority. The most powerful of those which have never been subdued, are the Menches, inhabiting the north-eastern corner of the state. So spirited and hostile are these people, that in 1837 the then government of Central America found it necessary to make a league of friendship with their cacique; in this document all pretension of authority over them was yielded,—which was, indeed, no great privation to the whites, seeing that not one had ever ventured into their territory. Also, certain stipulations were made providing the free passage of missionaries "to instruct the young Indians in civilised knowledge," but such have been the disturbances of the republic that no effort has been made to profit by this permit,—which is probably fortunate for the missionaries, and not quite unlucky for the Menches.

Of another race of Indians, virtually free, and most jealous of strangers, Von Tempsky gives an interesting account in "Mitla." They live almost due north of Quesaltenango, and their numbers are estimated at 24,000 souls. Except in that they have adopted a drunken parody of Christianity, with which they relieve the monotony of human sacrifice, these people, said to be Quiché by race, preserve all the customs of their forefathers before the Spanish conquest. I may add, that those customs, with the exception of the sacrifices aforesaid, seem to be quite as civilised, much more decent, and infinitely more orderly, than those of the surrounding Christians.

In the north of Vera Paz, to the west of Peten, and all along the Usumacinta, dwell numerous and warlike tribes, called generally Lacandones. They are of one stock with the Menches, of whom I have before spoken. It is of course quite impossible to estimate the power of these races, their civilisation, or customs, but I may observe, that all Guatemalans agree in assigning

100,000 souls to the Menche race alone; and not a few have assured me that the Lacandones generally are more numerous than all the remaining population of the republic. This would give them something like 900,000 souls, but it is mere guesswork and tradition. That they are very numerous is beyond doubt, for until the middle of the last century they kept the whole northern part of Guatemala in continual terror by their fierce incursions. Certainly the Lacandones and their country, so mysterious and romantic, offer one of the most interesting subjects of exploration left in the world. Whether or no we believe in the Itzimaya, the great city of golden mystery, we must at least feel a thrill of excitement in reflecting that a territory exists in which such a romance is possible. That the Itzis or Lacandones were very highly civilised only one hundred and fifty years ago, we are assured by the report of Mazariegos, who captured their island city of Flores, in 1695. Valenzuela, who accompanied the invading forces, and took part in their barbarous destruction of palaces and temples, tells us that the Indian buildings were far handsomer and more solidly built than those of Guatemala. Fleeing from Peten into the wilderness, the Lacandones disappeared from view, and it may be they raised again in Vera Paz the stately edifices which Spanish vandals had destroyed. Waldeck observes, that certain of these Indians whom he met were dressed in the precise fashion of the Palenque monuments. Any gentleman who has seen a picture of those monuments will readily believe that they cut a peculiarly curious figure.

Into Mexico proper I do not design to enter.

In the eastern and northern parts of Honduras, the departments of Yoro and Olancho, are several "bravo" tribes—Payas, Secos, Xicaques, and Caribs; none of these have ever been conquered except the latter, who, as everyone knows, were deported from St. Vincent by the English. The most noticeable peculiarity known of these Indians is their custom of living all together in one house, like the Dyaks of Borneo. Each family has an apartment of its own. They are peaceful, industrious, and remarkably cleanly. Under ordinary circumstances, they are friendly with the white population, but they absolutely decline to submit to the authority of the republic.

Of Yucatan I have not been able to obtain any reliable information. Stephens observes, that there *may be* "bravo" Indians in the interior, of which very little is known, but he does not assert that he was absolutely so informed. If this be so, we should expect to find them in a condition much more advanced than the other unconquered tribes, excepting the Lacandones, for the Mayas of Yucatan were, and still are,

very superior in intelligence to the other Indians of Central America.

Of all these independent tribes the Guatusos, or as they are called by the Caribs, Pranzos, should be in some respects most interesting to the English traveller. The broad San Juan river, which now, subject to protest, forms the boundary between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, has two large tributaries descending from the Merivalles mountains and the San José table land. The most easterly is the Serebpiqui, and next to it the San Carlos. Both these streams are rocky and dangerous, full of rapids, and subject to sudden floods; little adapted, in fact, for traffic purposes. But there is a third river, larger than the eastern streams, which falls directly into the lake of Nicaragua, almost at the point in which the San Juan flows out of it. So far as has been explored, it is a slow, deep stream, much blocked with fallen timber, but in other respects suited for navigation. This is the Frio, or Cold River, and its waters are, indeed, sensibly cooler than those of the lake. Where this river rises, what its course, or the dangers of its navigation, no man knows; one fact alone is assured about the Frio,—that its headwaters are the favourite haunt of the Guatusos. The growing commerce of San José has striven hard for an outlet on the Atlantic shore, and bold woodsmen have, at various times, cut a mule track to the Serebpiqui and San Carlos; but the dangers of these streams are too great for commerce. The Rio Frio is the outlet provided by nature for the produce of San José coffee grounds; but nature provides for all her children alike, and she has posted the Guatuso family upon this San José canal.*

Everything connected with these fierce Indians is shrouded in mystery, but curiously enough all accounts agree in giving them an origin far from their present seats. The story current among Costa Ricans is especially interesting to us, even though we be ever so doubtful of its truth. When Sir Francis Drake, say they, retired to the Pacific shore, after the sack of Esparsa, a large body of his men mutinied, in mad hopes of holding that town against the Creole forces, and colonising it. Drake left them to their fate. The Spanish army assembled with all speed, and the mutineers were only aroused on finding themselves nearly surrounded. Hastily escaping, they took a route through the Merivalles mountains, with an intention of cutting

* I may mention in passing, that Nicaragua also lays claim to the Frio territory, and apparently with some reason; but Costa Rica, strong in her coffee and her mountains, treats these rights with contempt. It is scarcely necessary to add that neither government seems very anxious to make close acquaintance with the subjects whose possession they dispute.

their way to the friendly Mosquito shore. Unquestionably this route would lead them through the country of the modern Guatusos, then, we are told, called Pranzos. It is certain that the Buccaneers never crossed the San Juan, and equally certain that the Spaniards never fell in with them. Many in Costa Rica believe that, wearied out with hardships, they came to rest around the head waters of the Frio, where they destroyed the male population and took the women to wife. The universal legend of surrounding people, Indians, Caribs, Nicaraguans, and Costa Ricans, declares the Guatuso race to be distinguished by red or fair hair, and blue eyes,—whence their new name “Guatuso” or red rabbit. Another fact is asserted of them—that they speak English,—but that is said, and with some truth, of every “bravo” tribe round Mosquito. It is not a little curious, that in the various fights of invading expeditions, no Indian has been seen in daylight, except upon one occasion; the arrow is discharged from an unseen archer, the celt strikes silently from behind. The single exception to this rule was in an expedition made by Captain Parker, of Greytown, in 1863. He asserts that an Indian shot by him upon the Frio on that occasion, showed precisely the colour and type of a Texan Comanche. Mr. Froebel also gives a romantic story of a young German who fell into the hands of the Guatusos—he was tied to a tree, and the usual incidents took place,—chief’s daughter—touching speech—marriage and escape, and so on; but the hero, who is now happily established at San Francisco, says nothing about this white complexion.

Such is the Costa Rican tradition, which is so strongly accredited there, that an European minister, forgetful of chronology, fervently prayed us to carry an Union Jack in front of our exploring party. Another story referring to the same event, describes the fugitives as tame Indians, who took advantage of the buccaneer disturbances to make their escape over the mountains. In Nicaragua various stories, more or less curious, are current; some assert, that in a grand foray the Guatusos, who came from Mosquito, carried off thousands of Spanish women, whereby the national complexion was changed. In reference to this theory, one must needs inquire where on earth the women came from? All Nicaragua would scarcely have given tens for the thousands needed. Others believe the Guatusos to be descended from the old inhabitants of Zapatero, who fled from that island in a single night, scared by the practice of Christianity as shown by missionary padres. Possibly there is truth in all these stories, and the population of the Rio Frio is made up from the bravest fragments of many surrounding tribes.

In regard to their condition, nothing whatever is reliably known. Padre Zepeda, a Jesuit, declared in 1750, that he lived many months among them and was kindly entertained. He speaks of towns, and houses, and gardens. The latter point is certainly curious, if the Padre really meant to describe a garden as we understand the word. His report caused several missionary expeditions to be despatched up the Frio, and over the mountains, but the Guatusos were found to be just as ready to despatch missionaries as the most zealous bishop could be. And so the attempts were gradually abandoned, with no further success than the addition of several martyrs to the calendar; nevertheless, some of these parties approached the Indian territory so as to see towns and immense fields under cultivation.

Independently of romance, the exploration of the Rio Frio is of great importance to civilisation. The richest specimens of gold quartz I ever saw came from this district, and the weirdly fame of these Indians, who act as dragons watching treasure, alone deters a swarm of adventurous diggers from hastening thither. Lying as it does between the San Juan river, the Atlantic, and the coffee grounds of Costa Rica, it is evident that if a railroad or canal should ever be carried across Nicaragua, a branch line, or at least a solid road, must be constructed along the banks of the Frio to convey the growing commerce of San José. Sooner or later then the Guatusos must be disturbed, for it would be preposterous to retain the present trade route by Punt 'Arenas, Panama, or the Horn, if any lasting transit scheme were opened in Nicaragua. Such a branch line would revolutionise the whole trade of Costa Rica, which has now no communication with the Atlantic coast.

Two serious attempts have been made in modern times to explore this territory; both failed from a want of caution almost inconceivable to one unacquainted with the Creole mind. The earliest, in 1849, consisted of fifty soldiers, under the guidance of Don Trinidad Salazar, Commandante of San Carlos. This party was utterly overwhelmed by unseen enemies, and three alone regained the mouth of the river. The second attempt was made from Costa Rica by land, and this likewise was routed with enormous loss. Beside these two large expeditions, Captain Parker of Greytown, accompanied by three Frenchmen, ascended the river in 1863. On the sixth day they fell in with a tall savage, who was spearing fish. Him they shot in self-defence, but so ferociously dauntless was his bearing when thus suddenly confronted by four armed monsters,—as white men must have seemed to him,—that Captain Parker and his party unanimously determined to risk no more encounters, and returned precipitately.

I have referred to certain specimens of gold ore in the possession of Colonel Don Juan Estrada, in San José de Costa Rica. These fragments were obtained in a very romantic manner. At the time of the filibuster war, Colonel Cauty, an Englishman in the service of Costa Rica, was placed in command of Castillo Viejo on the San Juan river. Two of his men, preferring to face the evils they knew not of, deserted from that fort, and plunged into the Frio forests. Two months afterwards they made their appearance in San José, where they were recognised, and placed in separate confinement. Such scientific men as Costa Rica can boast examined them again and again in reference to their route, seeing they must necessarily have traversed the Guatuso country. They told a curious story of adventure,—how they journeyed by night through Indian roads, and over numerous streams, passing several large villages or towns, surrounded by earthen walls, over which roofs and standard poles were visible in the moonlight. Among other wonders, they asserted that all the streams of this district flowed over beds of gold, and in confirmation produced the specimens alluded to, which are certainly most singularly rich. Their account created great excitement, as was natural, among a gambling population, but no further effort was made after the massacre of the Costa Rican party, to which I have already referred.

For it must be recollected that Costa Rica differs from the other republics in possessing a very large trade, and a very small mingling of races. The old Spanish blood in that republic is not in a minority so small as to be almost invisible, but on the contrary, numbers two-thirds of the population. The people are orderly, industrious, and fairly brave, while pauperism is almost unknown among them. The class, therefore, from which “prospecting” expeditions are recruited is absent here, and all the leading men in the country most strenuously oppose the weakly efforts made from time to time to explore the El Dorado of Central America. They fear, and with reason, that, to put other possibilities aside, if the fertile Atlantic plain were opened to colonisation, the peons of the coffee grounds would move thither in a body, and squat, each on his own little farm. The hostility of the coffee aristocracy must always therefore be expected in any attempt to explore those regions.

I had hoped to be at this moment in America on my way to the interesting territory I have described. It was our intention, could we raise volunteers enough, to force our way from San José de Costa Rica to the Rio Frio, thence to the Blewfields river to examine some most curious ruins lately found there,

and thence across the continent to Guatemala on further exploration. Men and money, however, both failed us for an enterprise so serious and so costly, and the spring season for travel in Guanacaste is lost for this year. May we be more fortunate in the autumn! But I greatly fear that the geography, ethnology, and antiquities of savage America will never be thoroughly known, until the Yankees take possession of that beautiful country,—an event for which all travellers should most devoutly pray!
